

Former USCIRF staffer charges Muslim bias

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) A former staffer of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has filed suit against the watchdog agency, saying that it rescinded a job offer because she is Muslim and had worked for a Muslim advocacy group.

In the suit filed Thursday (June 7) in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, Safiya Ghori-Ahmad charges that USCIRF staffers recommended her to be a South Asia policy analyst in 2009, but some commissioners pushed to retract the job offer after learning she worked for the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

According to the suit, Ghori-Ahmad was told after her initial hire that she could "limit the negative impression her beliefs and her background would create with members of the Commission" by calling in sick on days commissioners were expected to be in the office and by downplaying her religious affiliation.

Ghori-Ahmad, whose suit claims USCIRF had no other Muslim staff at the time she was rejected, said her experience "is part of a pattern of bias against Muslims" who have applied for jobs at USCIRF. She also claimed that some commissioners resisted criticizing European countries that considered banning minarets on mosques or headscarves worn by Muslim women.

USCIRF referred a request for comment to the Department of Justice, which declined to comment.

Nina Shea, a former USCIRF commissioner who the suit says questioned Ghori-Ahmad's hire, said Monday that she wrote at the time that Ghori-Ahmad's "writings reflect MPAC activism and bias, not scholarship, which would not serve us well on the research staff."

An email cited by Ghori-Ahmad's suit quoted Shea as saying that hiring the Muslim woman to analyze religious freedom in Pakistan would be akin to "hiring an IRA activist to research the UK twenty years ago."

Ghori-Ahmad is seeking back pay and compensation.